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The Perception of Politics in TV News

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Identity and Immeasurability: The Perception of Politics in TV News

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Introduction

This paper lines out a project concerning opinion building through TV in relation to politics and democracy. Departing from an interview study on the reception of mediated politics during the Danish parliamentary election campaign in November 2007, the project will explore and analyze the elements which are fundamental when citizens identify the central elements of mediated politics. Media presumably plays a central role concerning the formation of political attitudes. According to a number of modern sociologists TV plays a decisive part when it comes to impact on attitudes (Beck 1992). The power of the media is, therefore, increasingly seen as a fundamental aspect of modern society, and citizens' experiences of democratic processes are increasingly linked to understandings of mediated political communication – both in relation to political processes of regulation and individuals' understandings and perceptions of society and its problems (Bennett & Entman 2001).

Few studies examine how modern mediated politics is perceived by citizens. Increased professionalization of political communication motivates and stresses the importance of examining, how media affects exchanges of the information which agents employ in order to decide and act in relation to political life. Along with increased competence, knowledge and mediatization, the pattern of civic engagement is potentially affected. Changes, however, can run in several directions – and scientific theorising and empirical findings point at disagreement: Some claim that electronic media have broadened public debate or at least the public knowledge about politics (Schannell 1989, Norris 1999). Others see things in a rather different way. Stylistically, at least three variants can be presented: In the most “optimistic” version democracy thrives – if not completely without problems – then at least fairly well: Sense of political competence and participation in political elections and political life remain high in Denmark (Goul 2004). In the opposite variant we witness a state of “Democracy without citizens” (Entman 1989) in which the public sphere is emptied of the

participation and intervention of laymen. In an intervening variant (Andersen & Kristensen 2006), a new type of citizen is identified, which is politically attentive and knowledgeable but not politically engaged.

It's a general idea in much of the theoretic literature in the field of democratic thinking and political sociology that public discourse serves the function of empowering citizens by giving them a voice and an agency and helps them act on behalf of their interests and values. Engaging citizens in the democratic process is a high held ideal serving to foster active participation in the public sphere (Gamson 2001). In this line of thinking a common will emerges in the process of public deliberation, and participation transforms individuals into public citizens (Barber 1984, Mansbridge 2006). In the Habermasian ideal of the public sphere and in many parts of theories of democracy it is a basic argument that public debate serves to enable citizens to act on behalf of their interests. Political participations is crucial for the 1) individuals' empowerment and self-development as a citizen; 2) the outcome of the political process; 3) increasing the collective capacity of citizens to act on their own behalf (Gamson 2001). The foundation of these effects rests on a well-functioning public sphere – where the media help people to engage as citizens. Dahlgren claims that the public sphere should provide: “the institutional sites where popular political will should take form and citizens should be able to constitute themselves as active agents in the political process.... The goal is to establish structures of broadcasting in the public interest ... which optimize diversity in terms of information, viewpoints and forms of expression, and which foster full and active citizenship” (Dahlgren 1991 pp.2, 11) In the process of public deliberation participation transforms individuals into public citizens (Gamson 2001).

However, several political science studies inform us that such assumptions are highly dubious. In the Habermasian ideal such effects rely on a well functioning public sphere with a free press and a free circulation of information. It is, though, by no means rather clear, to what extend

Habermas describes an empirical reality or a normative vision (Calhoun 1995, Dahlgren 2003; Hoff et al. 2005). In the public sphere the political will is shaped and citizens constitute themselves as actors in the political process. The aim is a diversity of arguments that can be structured into a common will – supporting an active and full citizenship. In Habermas’ “The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere” (1962/89) the ideal public sphere is characterized by a rational-critical debate in which citizens reason towards a common will. It is founded upon voluntary, reasonable and open debate and processes of deliberation and decision making is characterized by recognized and shared ”standards of reason” – the winning power of the better argument as well as the absence of self-interest. Habermas points at a general decay and several deficits to this ideal – famously epistomized in the thesis on the refeudalization of the public sphere and in the general idea of the system world colonizing the life world and the “communicative rationality” of the latter: Journalism looses its claim to reason, public discourse degenerates into public relations. The logic of commercialism increasingly dominate the media – causing industrialization of public opinion, trivialization of public opinion (not least in electronic media) and so on (Dahlgren 2003). Later, however, Habermas has taken on a less pessimistic view of the public sphere (Habermas 1996).

The project wants to examine how people perceive and understand politics in TV news, and to what extend (or how) the media help people to engage as political citizens? More specifically, the project will focus on two questions: How is the individual perception of mass mediated politics related to personal ‘first hand’ experience, and how does media distance and scepticism co-exist with political engagement and knowledge based on media experience? The basic approach will be phenomenological, i.e. oriented towards the life-worlds of the interviewees, but will be analytically informed by discourse analysis.

Political information and political attentiveness

The Danes' consumption of printed media is falling drastically these years and has done so during a longer period. The share of adult Danes who regularly (3-4 times a week) read a newspaper has decreased significantly – and the reduction is continually - and with each new generation – enhanced. On the other hand, the share of individuals who follow and gather political information via TV and Internet is growing (Togeby et al. 2004). Generally there is an ongoing transformation of the requirement of political news from print to screen – whether this be passive (TV) or interactive (PC) use of screen based media. We don't know about the implications of such changes – but it is our assumption that it means something and that there are consequences. Consequences for the ways in which we experience, interpret and understand political life – its actors and its institutions. Not necessarily changes of the political horizon and patterns of political orientation, but rather consequences in the form of decreasing political engagement. A recent study reveal signs of high political knowledge combined with decreasing political engagement (Andersen & Kristensen 2006).

The scenario which the transformation outlined here epitomize evokes increasing anxiety among various scholars – particularly in the USA and in the UK – regarding declining voter turnouts – especially with concern for the youth – and also regarding vanishing party loyalty – which is claimed to be on the decline (Dahlgren 2001). Growing cynicism and falling civil engagement are emphasized as central problems (Putnam 2000). Boggs (1997) even speak of "the great retreat". Others pay attention to more delicate changes in patterns of political orientation and participation and the growth of "lifestyle politics" (Bennett 1998), which is characterized by an individualized, rather than a collective, engagement, and increased attention to single-issue-policies rather than ideology and overarching political issues. In a Scandinavian setting Dahlgren and others have argued for serious changes in the political public sphere and the political culture – also hereby

stressing changes in the functioning of democracy (Dahlgren 2003). It is not the aim of this study to uncover the actual state of democracy. It is rather the argument that these years we witness a slipping of the normative ideal of the notion of democracy caused by changes in the political public sphere and increasing medialisation causing the growth of "mediacracy".

Modern mediacracy

The use of the term "mediacracy" (Louw 2005) here is not to be seen as a notion signifying an empirical, factual recovery of the order of things. It is on the other side not to be seen as a normative, meaning a signifier denoting an ideal of the public sphere. It is rather a temporary analytical notion incarnating some central features characterizing the late modern capitalist democracy and political culture in Denmark. We see it as a profound system working in this way: "Mediacracy" is a media-centred democracy, that is a political system where a vast majority of political activity is conducted with the media in mind, and the public receive the vast majority of their information from media reporting (Lilleker 2006). It is a system in which a still lesser part of the political activity goes on at an interpersonal level, as decision-makers are unable to reach mass voters through traditional methods and face-to-face meetings, and in which mass media continually plays the decisive role for communicating with the vast majority of citizens (Lilleker 2006).

In this contemporary setting some have argued for the growth of "designer politics". To Louw (2005) the central dimension of modern politics is the very creation of a given public. Individuals are isolated and atomized. Publics are assembled by professional "public builders", and the media functions as the "social glue" constructing and keeping public opinion together. Even though the masses do not know each other (they are never physically brought together) – or communicate with each other – they are "guided" by the media to carry out the same actions – epistomized by the funeral of Princess Diana, which signifies an ultimate "hyper construct" – in

which individuals take on collective behaviour by mourning the death of a celebrity they do not personally know. In this sense, Louw claims, media cease being "media" in the traditional sense – that is as the messenger of information and communication going from sender to receiver. Instead, they transform into some means of perception. Media in this scenario turn into some kind of image builder – which construct, stage and communicate the "reality", which is publicly acknowledged and debated. This argument, naturally, is taken to extremes. But the point is clear: Reality is increasingly medialised.

In more cynical variants of this scenario modern governance is seen as a process of establishing a demagogical power where policy-elites manipulate and control the medialised politics and the mass media output. In Barbara Cruikshank's (1999) version citizens are formed by various "technologies of citizenship" working to enhance or limit citizens capabilities for acting in democratic arenas and the public sphere (Dahlgren 2003). Entman even speak of "Democracy without citizens": In place of active citizens, he claims, we have publics, who are "herded" by professional media operators creating a "hype machinery" (Entman 1989).

Theories on reception, late modernity and political communication

A central theme in theories on reception is whether – and to which extend – individuals are being affected by the media – and exactly how this is done. This issue has theoretically been presented and analyzed in various ways. In the so called "theories of injection" that dominated theories of communication in the first half of the 20. Century, scholars imagined - roughly put – that the media injected attitudes directly into the heads of a defenceless audience (Gripsrud 2002). Later on, the common ideas was that the media does not decide what people must think – but rather what they must think about (McCombs & Shaw 1972). Reception analyses – often inspired from Marxist theory – were dominating in the 70's. Here it was the general attitude that the media exerts

fundamental political power. This strand of theory was highly influenced by the Birmingham-school – and the Cultural Studies-tradition with inspiration from Gramsci's hegemony theory, confronting the common liberal idea of the public sphere with a pluralistic pattern of media supply preventing hegemonic structures of power and interests from dominating the public domain. The most well-known theorist of this position, Stuart Hall, suggested that TV broadcasts are "coded" with certain social and cultural perceptions – with resulting effects – primarily the spread of certain dominating understandings ("the preferred reading", Hall 1973). Also theories of the humanities on reception and social behavior have had a strong impact: not least critical theory – e.g. represented by Adorno & Horkheimer's (1944) – "Dialectic of Enlightenment," - which argued that the standardisation of the culture industry led to an analogous standardisation of the populations way of thinking and living.

We do not subscribe strictly to these theoretical contributions. We believe that citizens' political engagement is certainly affected by the media, but that these matters should also be seen in the light of the shaping from societal structures and processes of globalisation, economisation and aesthetisation. Further, we put an emphasis on at least three different processes of differentiation affecting both agency and structures and with radical consequences for citizenship and political communication:

Late modernity – incarnated by increased differentiation, specialisation and gradual dissolution of established structures and social classes – resulting in fragmentation of various levels and societal sectors. Politics of identity gradually replaces politics of interests. Also a spread and profiling of a variety of values and ways of living can be witnessed.

Individualisation – processes of individualisation are dominated by characteristics such as freedom of choice, consumerism, higher demands and expectations – also in relation to the political-administrative system concerning responsiveness and user influence. Changes in voter

behaviour can be recognized including declining party loyalty, and instrumental behaviour, as opposed to the "believers" and ideological voters linked to previous times. The citizen role is gradually changing and is extendedly related to consumerism and satisfaction of immediate needs. The role of the consumer can not be perceived as antithetic to the citizen role. Rather, the model of the marked, market relations, individual freedom and choice get a stronger standing compared to democratic values as justice, equality and solidarity (Dahlgren 2003). According to Ulrich Beck, processes of individualisation force standardisation and control on the actor, regarding everything from shopping to attitudes. Such mechanisms make processes of individualisation appear as institutionalisation of society – an institutional shaping of conditions of life. This also relates to TV affecting forms of conversation and life styles – in the sense that TV place individuals in same situations. People through out the world are affected by institutionally produced TV shows – potentially standardising and homogenising forms of life. TV has a huge potential for rectifying minds. People, according to Beck (1992), are without control on the shaping by media which they are affected by. This goes on globally – in "the global village of TV" – and very locally when family members individually watch a TV show at home.

New media, new channels and increased mediatisation – signifying a development in which the media establish themselves as the epicentre of social processes in a media-centred public sphere. Blumer & Kavanagh (1999) identify three markedly different phases for political communication in the post war period:

Age 1: ca. 1945-1965

Prior to "television age" political parties and professional organisations produced and distributed the political communication themselves. It was primarily ideological of nature. This was the "golden age" of political parties. The party system was closely articulated to entrenched

cleavages of social structure (Blumer & Kavanagh 1999). The parliament was the centre of political initiatives and debates. The party system was stable and the Danish society was to a large extent characterized by being a consensus society (Pedersen & Horst 2000). Party identification is common and persistent and there is a high level of confidence in political institutions. However, this era culminates with a paradox: political messages are substantive and enjoy fairly ready access to the mass media of the period, but the citizenry does not equally respond – only few adopts the arguments or engages in the political public. Instead, people tend to vote according to class- or group-based loyalties. In the body of floating voters, interest in politics is low, and political messages do not get through. According to the Habermasian ideal, the communication system is higher elaborated than peoples' ability to engage and sift the arguments.

Age 2: ca. 1965-1985

In Denmark (with state monopoly and just a single channel) TV is quickly dispersed nationwide – warning a new era for political communication. The public sphere is multiplied so to speak. At the same time parties are loosing members. A media revolution also occurs in this period with an explosion of communication technology and –channels. Previously, TV functioned as a single public sphere (everyone was watching "Matador" at the same time) – where as people today are able to watch almost everything at different hours. Earlier on a politician potentially was able to reach the entire population by going on screen. Now, it takes a lot more. This causes journalistic styles and approaches to change radically – and neutrality is established as an "ideal". TV is also becoming a central medium of political socialisation, from where individuals gain their first experiences with the political system. This period signifies a vast educational explosion – or "cognitive revolution" to quote Inglehart (1997). The citizen is capable and willing. Political

parties and politicians on the other side in this new reality must work harder and learn new "tricks" by adopting certain strategies and tactics. The professional model of modern political campaigning gradually evolves. Politicians realize that they can not speak freely – or "speak their minds" in front of running cameras. Also, this era pivots on a paradox: citizens' ability to cope and manage in an increasingly dispersed and differentiated reality has improved. Still, they are served an ever emptier and less nourishing communications diet (Blumer & Kavanagh 1999).

Age 3: ca. 1985-

Media and means of communication in this still emerging phase are omnipresent. We witness a proliferation of channels, sources, devices, ICT, and so forth. The dynamics and the innovations follow a centripetal line of development. Once there was only one TV channel – and one news program. Now there is multiple channels – some with 24- hours news reporting. We also see a new media saturated style of politics (Louw 2005). Professionals get in control of political advocacy. Once, political communication was largely a top down- affair. Laymen were almost absent in the media picture except for a few vox pops. Today, there has been a democratisation of the public domain. In many ways media are characterized by a culture with a strong focus on audiences. When opportunities increase, people are to a lesser degree tolerant towards an "imposed agenda" – and the ever commercialised media readily articulate, what "ordinary" people find interesting. Today, we see polls, votes and involvement from ordinary people in various broadcasted programmes - stressing exactly peoples' subjectivity. Also, politicians are "interpellated" by this these trends – placing a new focus on individual citizens. The personal is increasingly politicized - and politics is increasingly aestheticized. It turns on dramatic performances rather than instrumental struggles (Calhoun 1995).

Summary

Communication constitutes the public opinion, which is unique and delimited from the citizens' private affairs as well as the official doctrines of the state. The Habermasian ideal of the public sphere is based on the public deliberation aiming at the common good, in which citizens participate without considering their private interests. Here it is the power of the better argument which is decisive – not the position of power in society. This could also be argued to constitute a lot of ordinary social relations between humans. Following Norwegian scientist Jostein Gripsrud (2002) you can, however, ask how often on TV you watch a leading politician crying out in a discussion: "My God, you're right. I am completely wrong!"? TV-mediated politics is in its basic form a reflection of "adversary", rather than "unitary" democracy, to use Jane Mansbridge's terms (Mansbridge 1984). This could actually be one of the very reasons why people quite often simply can not be bothered to follow political duels on TV or confrontations between firmly positioned political actors or the general slipstream of political presentations and election campaigns. Such items resemble very little of real world inter-personal dialogue and ordinary reasoning – based as this is on the fundamental premise, that people are willing to give up their point of view, when presented with a better argument.

Medialised democracy in which the modern party organisation sets the agenda in the public domain is increasingly characterised and controlled by media experts (Strömbäck 2006). Elite dominance of top down controlled, oligarchic bureaucratic political parties dominated by professional experts and politicians in this respect resemble the basic line of a "Democracy without citizens" (Entman 1989). The lines of evolution and the societal processes which presented here challenge the common ideal of the political public sphere, according to which the "citroen" takes on a celebrated part in democracy – being active, engaged and public-spirited. The shrinking of political discourse and action is tightly linked to corporate expansion (Boggs 1997). It is in no way

possible to separate the consumer and the citizen role. The ideal citizen is politically active, informed, extrovert (has got the common good as his horizon) – where as the consumer role (based on consume and self-interest) is individual, isolated, egocentric and introvert (has the market or the ego as horizon). Citizenship has not extinguished, but it has taken on new forms – in life politics, to use Anthony Giddens' (1991) term, and in consume. As consummates we have more money than ever, and we have more options than ever. The identity of the consumer has to some extent marginalised politics as the driving force in society (Schammel 1999).

Methodology and analytical approach

The project examines the reception and interpretation of mediated politics by conducting single- and focus group interviews of Danish Laymen. A series of semi-structured interviews were made during the Danish parliamentary election campaign in November 2007. They took place in private homes starting out by viewing a prime time television news programme. Central interview themes were the on going election campaign (politicians, parties, and events), the use of different media, as well as everyday interactions in relation to political attitudes and decision making processes. The overall scholarly aim was to explore the various ways in which mass mediated politics is made meaningful by “ordinary” citizens. The project departs from the experiences that were made during this pilot-study. The basic approach is phenomenological, i.e. oriented towards the life-worlds of the interviewees. The methodological approach used in the study involves “intruding” into the respondents' world - subsequently trying to condense, reconstruct and interpret meaning and belief systems - in relation to democracy, society and political processes.

Culture consists of patterns of practices and meaning and they provide taken for granted orientations – factual and normative – as well as other resources for collective life. They are internalised inter subjectively: they exist “in our heads”, guiding and informing action, speech and

understanding. The notion of civic culture is anchored in everyday life and its horizons, and can thus be seen as an important region of the Habermasian life world with its negotiation of norms and values (Dahlgren 2003). This approach calls for a bottom up-methodology, as top-down approaches to identity generally operate on the precondition that there exists a tight correspondence between structural position and identity. Therefore, we aim for analyses that are process-oriented (rather than structural – or actor-voluntarist for that matter). We believe in relating citizens' political involvement and their uses of media to the concept of civic culture and political identity. It is our sense that the theme of political engagement/disengagement and the relevance of the media in this regard would benefit from a perspective that understands citizens' participation in terms of meaningful action and the cultural prerequisites for such action. This includes examining citizens' everyday perceptions and the ways in which multiple identities are challenged and confronted in meetings with mediated politics. The idea of civic culture takes as a starting point the notion of citizens as social agents, and asks: which are the cultural factors that can impinge on the actions and communication of people in their roles as multifarious citizens (Dahlgren 2003). In what ways are politics made meaningful in reception of modern political communication? And what cultural or cognitive tools are necessary for handling such confrontations?

Subjective dispositions, resources and experiences are challenged by contemporary democracy and at the same time individuals are interpellated by news and political communication as an everyday source of framing subjectivity in late modernity. A modern perspective on citizenship should not be seen as an ambitious "theory"; it does not anticipate being able to offer full explanations about citizens' democratic participation or lack of it, but is rather seen as a contemporary analytical perspective that must be exploited and confronted. It is explorative by nature. It does not aim at final, complete or exhaustive theoretical definitions. Hopefully, however, it can enhance our understanding of human action and meaning-making in concrete settings. The

empirical angles covering the co-existence of citizens and media consumption will –hopefully - help us understand the different ways of internalisation and forms of inter subjectivity existing – guiding and motivating action, thereby reflecting modern society. Also, it might enhance our understanding of various modes and intensities of engagement and conscious decisions about omitting political engagement – as well as dimensions of dynamic interaction hindering or facilitating active engagement and the unfolding of modern citizenship in all its pluralistic bloom.

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